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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 SOFIA 000394

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STATE FOR EUR AND PM - AMBASSADOR LOFTIS
OSD FOR PETE NAJERA AND LESLEY YOUNG

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TAGS: [MARR](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KPAO](#) [RU](#) [BU](#)
SUBJECT: BULGARIA: PRIME MINISTER ON BASING

REF: A. STATE 41169
[1](#)B. 05 SOFIA 02123

Classified By: DCM Jeff Levine for reasons 1.4 (a) and (d).

[1](#)1. (S) SUMMARY. Prime Minister Sergei Stanishev told Ambassador on March 15 that Bulgaria remains committed to a successful conclusion of the basing negotiations, although additional consultations between the ruling coalition's party leaders are necessary. Following these consultations, according to Stanishev, the Council of Ministers on March 23 will provide Bulgaria's negotiators an updated mandate to address the final unresolved issues. For the first time, the Bulgarians explicitly acknowledged that Russia is very sensitive about the proposed shared bases, with special concerns about a possible U.S. presence in northeast Bulgaria. The Ambassador used points provided reftel A to address GOB concerns, and Stanishev expressed appreciation for the additional information. Despite a few recent bright spots, negative publicity and misinformation continue to surround the basing proposals, and the GOB recognizes the major public information/relations challenge it is facing. Bulgaria's lead negotiator confirmed from Brussels that he is ready to resume negotiations March 22. END SUMMARY.

[1](#)2. (S) During the discussion, Stanishev agreed that the Secretary's expected visit in April for the NATO Ministerial

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would be a prime opportunity to sign the agreement, but cautioned "that should not be a goal in itself." More important, according to Stanishev, is an agreement that presents the bases in a strategic context and allows the GOB to demonstrate that its national interests are "well-defended." There is enough support within the three-party coalition, Stanishev said, to overcome negative public pressure. Apologizing for the delay in providing a final mandate to the negotiators, Stanishev said coalition partner and head of the Simeon Movement Simeon Saxe-Coburg was out of the country and unavailable until next week. He and Turkish leader Ahmed Doghan, according to Stanishev, have received most of their information regarding the negotiations through press coverage and need to be consulted on the final issues.

[1](#)3. (S) The Ambassador used reftel A points to explain our positions on the troop numbers and proposed facilities that had raised concerns, stressing these did not reflect substantive changes in our overall basing concept. PM Advisor Valentin Radomirski, who participated in the discussion, noted that the inclusion of Shabla Training Area in northeast Bulgaria, is a very sensitive point for the

Russians. Shabla had been used by Russia for training exercises during the Warsaw Pact days, according to Radomirski "and there's still a lot of cold war thinking going on."

¶4. (SBU) Negative press coverage continues to dominate on the issue including a March 11 interview with Russian Col-Gen. Mazurkevich. Mazurkevich not so subtly questioned the permissibility of the basing arrangement under NATO-Russia agreements, implied the U.S. is after control of the Black Sea and concluded "The US bases are your business, but we too would like you to sometimes listen to the opinion of your neighbors, as thousands of their sons lost their lives for Bulgaria's freedom." His comments joined a regular flow of negative reporting/commentary that has focused on lack of respect for Bulgaria's sovereignty, the possible presence of nuclear weapons and the possibility of U.S. attacks against third countries from these bases - specifically Iran. Playing on these fears, the ultra-nationalist Ataka party introduced a bill in Parliament February 25 calling for a national referendum on the basing agreement that was rejected 120 to 18 with two abstentions.

¶5. (SBU) Unfortunately, Ataka's charges continue to resonate with the public. According to polling commissioned by the Embassy in January, roughly two thirds of Bulgarians oppose a basing agreement with the U.S., unchanged from earlier polling data (reftel B). As viewed by the public, the main concerns are:

- Threat to the country's security, risk of terrorist attacks, and danger of military attacks -- from and on the bases;

- Violation of Bulgaria's independence/sovereignty, interference with the country's policies, opposition to a

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foreign military presence on Bulgarian territory;

- Environmental dangers including pollution and hazards to the local population.

¶6. (SBU) More than half of the polling respondents who were opposed to the agreement, however, did not give a reason for their opposition. This suggests that a large portion of the population remains uninformed on the issue and could be positively influenced by a government information effort and pro-basing public diplomacy activities. In a recent discussion of the issue with parliamentarians, members of the Defense and Foreign Affairs Committees stressed the importance to the public of "real political, social, and economic activities." MPs implied that much of the public's skepticism comes from a cynical belief that the government cannot defend Bulgaria's interests, especially when negotiating with a much stronger partner. Former deputy defense minister Ilko Dimitrov said it is vital for the public to perceive that "Bulgaria is an equal partner" in the negotiations and that "the U.S. is not imposing its views" on its smaller ally.

¶7. (SBU) In recent days, several more positive views have emerged including a commentary in the Socialist newspaper Duma assuring the public that Bulgarian interests are being protected in the negotiations; an informative interview with Angel Naidenov, head of the Parliamentary Defense Committee and supportive statements from Sofia's popular mayor Boiko Borisov. The Ambassador and Prime Minister agreed both sides should continue to stress the strategic relationship into which the basing agreement fits, the Bulgarian identity of these bases (Bulgarian flag and commanders) and transparency regarding the agreement itself.

¶8. (C) COMMENT. As it did with the Iraq follow-on mission, the GOB has been using a "slow release" public affairs strategy presenting a successful outcome to the negotiations

as a fait accompli. This remains the expected conclusion, but continued public resistance and opposition within the Prime Minister's own Socialist party make it another difficult decision for the Government. Expeditious conclusion of the negotiations is advantageous to both sides.

We continue to believe that public attitudes will change once the agreement is signed and we are able to demonstrate the advantages of hosting U.S. troops. Our most effective means of countering criticism will be the trouble-free presence of U.S. forces in Bulgaria. END COMMENT.
Beyrle